
This Still Present Moment: an Interview with Gary Snyder

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This *Still* Present Moment: an Interview with Gary Snyder

HELENA FEDER

IT WOULD BE DIFFICULT TO OVER-estimate Gary Snyder's influence on American poetry. A member of the San Francisco Renaissance, and reluctant "Beat," Snyder's poems and essays delineate the West Coast in the second half of the twentieth century. But Snyder is not only one of the best writers of his generation; he is a uniquely metaphysical poet, carefully, at times elegantly, observing the world in the service of ecological consciousness. Enacting the interconnectedness of ethics and aesthetics, Snyder's movements draw energy from the mingling of seeming opposites. Constellating ideas and images of the East and West, form and formlessness, sound and sense, nature and culture, stillness and time, Snyder calls our attention to the practice of meaning. The last of these pairings characterize many of the lessons of *This Present Moment*, his first new book of poems in over a decade.

We spoke on a sunny day last October at the house he built at *Kitkitdizze*. We sat outside and talked over pots of tea. There had just been several large wildfires in Northern California, and I could smell the burn on nearby hills. In this interview, Snyder discusses native plants and urban parks, poetic and Buddhist practices, tools and technology, and the etiquette and endurance of the wild. Throughout, Snyder's humor and sense of play is sharper than ever. At eighty-five, he affirms his commitment to the music of words, his bioregion, and the community of all beings. Still edged by risk, still an encompassing voice, Snyder still resists telling us everything.

Feder: I want to begin where we are, at *Kitkitdizze*, the home you've built in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. What is *Kitkitdizze* all about?

Snyder: I named the place right around me, and the house, after this local plant, *Kitkitdizze*. It's not well known, but

you'll find it in books. It's a Californian plant not found anywhere else in the United States. The native people around here, the Nisenan, said it makes an excellent tea for women. *Kitkitdizze* is the Wintun name for it; the Wintun is a tribal group down in the valley.

Feder: As we're talking about plants, I'd like to ask you about the California Native Plant Society. They seem serious about eradicating invasive species. You've written a lot about what it means to be a native of Shasta and Turtle Island; what are your thoughts on the concept of invasive species? Some biologists feel it's a useful marker, and then others (such as Stephen Jay Gould) call it "species ideology."

Snyder: What counts is whether they are xeric plants or not. Even the California Native Plant Society, when they start talking about the native plant landscapes, say, "Well you have to allow for the naturalized plants." The naturalized plants are xeric plants. They are the ones that will live and flourish with little, or much less, water. Of course, the characteristic of this climate (called a Mediterranean climate) is that it is winter-wet and summer-dry. There are lots of plants that are only dry-dry or wet-wet, but the mixture of summer-wet and winter-dry is only five climates in the world. It's a rather rare climate by comparison. California is one of them. There are xeric plants from other parts of the world that do very well here.

That's why we have so many wine grapes. You know, "invasive" is a scary-sounding term and it's not necessarily applicable. It means a plant is successful. There's not much competition for it. Weeds are considered successful and opportunistic plants; that's why we call them weeds. But they're tied into a succession system and they out-succeed themselves pretty quickly and are replaced by another whole spectrum of plants. They are specifically adapted to coming in after disturbed soils. That's

why they grow on the cutbanks of highways and so forth, or in areas that have been mined or strip-mined; weeds are just opportunistic early-succession plants. It's a curious thing, but some plants are more successful in a new environment than they are in their home environment. Like the Monterey pine, which has fairly limited range along the coast of California, but it's all over New Zealand. In fact, it's a major export species in the New Zealand lumber business. That's one of those puzzles that ecologists and plant people think about.

Feder: So would you say that, even though "invasive" is a loaded term, the distinction is useful?

Snyder: In this region, there's one rule to keep in mind: don't plant something that needs water in the summer. This is what the Native Plant Society people say. If you've got a good naturalized xeric plant, and there's plenty of them that look nice (*Acacia*, I like that), go ahead and plant it if that's what you want. If you want to be a purist and all, then use native California plants. There are nurseries now that only have native Californian plants. That's even more interesting, more of a challenge.

Feder: I ask about this because . . .

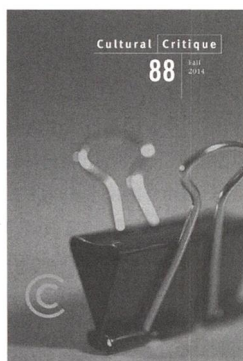
Snyder: I know. They're saying it's racist. Or, a class issue . . .

Feder: Well, the histories of botany and imperialism are intertwined (Jamaica Kincaid explores some of this in *My Garden (Book)*). But I ask because I find it interesting that some biologists use toxic chemicals in an effort to eradicate invasive species.

Snyder: Not all poisons are the same. They may make choices for ways of eradicating invasive plants that work perfectly well, and there may be choices that are polluting and have an aftereffect. You know, even Wendell Berry came out in favor of Roundup at one time. He also grew tobacco. He had an uncle, or a grandfather, who developed the economic communalization plan for

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allotments in the tobacco business, so that everybody got a cut of the profits and nobody overplanted in any given season. It's really interesting what they did there with tobacco-growing. I wish we can figure out how to do that with marijuana. Marijuana is going to be legal pretty soon. We're going to have to figure out how not to have it become a race to the bottom.

Feder: There's been a resurgence of work on plant consciousness and neurobiology. Michael Pollan published an article in *The New Yorker* summing up the research, arguing, "The line between plants and animals might be a little softer than we've traditionally thought of it." Do you have any thoughts on plant consciousness?

Snyder: We have *The Secret Life of Plants* in our library. I used to think about that a lot, but I don't much anymore. It seems obvious to me. But it [taking the idea seriously] would mean a radical change for Western culture. Those who follow the three Abrahamic religions, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, would have to be reminded that "Thou shall not kill" does not apply only to human beings.

Feder: Since we've discussed the term invasive, can I ask you about "working landscapes"? If every landscape is a working landscape, as we know, is it a useful term?

Snyder: It's only a useful term if people don't understand what it means.

I just came from a Black Mountain Institute panel last week in Las Vegas, in which the topic was the Great Basin, millions of acres of rabbit brush. What kind of a landscape is that? Public land. How much of Nevada is public land? Eighty percent. And how much of California is public land? Forty percent. Do you know where the public land in California is?

Feder: The desert?

Snyder: The desert! The Southeast is the Mojave Desert, and the Northeast is the Modoc Plateau. The Mojave Desert has almost no plant life in some sections, and the Modoc Plateau has a very limited plant life. So that's the West. The American West is a lot of public land. Most people think a "working" landscape is one we make money from.

Feder: "We" meaning . . . ?

Snyder: "We" meaning the people or, if not the people, corporations that have permission. In Nevada some people want public land free for grazing instead of having to pay fees. But you can't have it for free because the Bureau of Land Management puts a lot of work into keeping track of what's going on in this arid landscape. And then there's the other way of understanding the term, the idea that the landscape is doing its thing. It has its own reason for being.

All landscapes are working landscapes. There are no "worthless" landscapes. Our premodern, subsistence, foraging ancestors had trails. The trails went from one village to another village, or from one fishing hole to another fishing hole. But what they really were after was what was off the trail. So what's off the trail? Plants and dyes, poisons, all kinds of food, honey, recreational plants, bowlwood, arrowwood . . . The list goes on. All the plants that are now at the supermarket we used to find off the trail. You couldn't find them on the trail because everybody already picked them. So you break off this way, break off that way. Wandering across the landscape is what archaic people all did. They knew where everything was, like milkweed. Milkweed fiber is the strongest fiber there is, and milkweed ropes and twines are some of the best. Monarch butterflies' favorite food is milkweed blossoms. I was reading a wonderful little news article on populations of people in Detroit that are deliberately planting milkweed for the monarchs. What's happening in Detroit is fascinating: all these gardens coming back and all these gardeners evolving in the middle of it.

Feder: You know, the next meeting of ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment) will be in Detroit. Some ecological thinkers feel that, because of our dependence on power, more humans are going to have to move out of rural areas and into cities. What do you think about this?

Snyder: I have to question the assumption that everything is determined by power. That's not an ecological vision; that's an industrial vision.

Feder: Some so-called ecological visions are probably industrial ones.

Snyder: Well some are, and should be identified as such.

Feder: Is the human experience of the world diminished in cities? The wild exists everywhere (in our bodies, in the cracks of concrete), but are we diminished when we live a life more abstracted in human things? Thoreau wrote that humans need to see themselves surpassed.

Snyder: That's true. Actually you don't need a lot of it; you need enough to not see the road. But you need more than some woods to wander around in. You need to learn a few things too, what I call etiquette. The etiquette of the wild is to know what you're seeing, and to know how to say "Hello" to it when you see it. You keep learning as you go; you never finish. You apply yourself, not only to being out there, but to *seeing* what's going on out there. That's why foraging is so important.

Feder: It's wonderful to see foraging groups pop up all over the United States.

Snyder: Foraging makes you look to the wild for things. It makes you learn mushrooms, for example. I have six or seven mushroom books. There are mushrooms of all different toxicities and degrees of toxicity . . . and you know the toxicity is really to keep all the insects away. It's not to make you high.

Feder: Are you *sure* it's not their intent to make me high?

Snyder: Well, they won't tell you if it is! I mean, of course, there are some Gnostics who will tell you that there are plants that want to turn you on.

Feder: Plants do "manage" human behavior in certain ways.

Snyder: You could say that's true, and it's true, but we don't know why, or if there is will behind it. However, just be polite. Be careful and don't assume too much.

Feder: Just to finish the subject of cities . . .

Snyder: Cities could be so much better than they are. Do you know about the return of the wild to Chicago? I've read several articles on that now. The poster child for wild in Chicago is the coyote. I was at a meeting over in Gunnison, Colorado. Western Colorado University had

some speakers from all over, and they had one guy who was an expert on the return of the coyote and other wildlife to Chicago. There's a whole bunch of people that are watching it. One person saw, in the middle of the night, a coyote waiting at a red stoplight. When it turned green he went. [Snyder laughs]

Feder: Well, there's a poem: "Red light / coyote / waiting."

Snyder: There's the side of the Occident that you look at and say, "Oh it's hopelessly destructive in regard to the natural world." But we can imagine another side, a friendly Occident, a Taoist Occident that allows all kinds of creatures to move around. People love the idea that there are raccoons and coyotes living in Golden Gate Park, which there are. There's a place where you walk across the bridge between one part of Nevada City and another. You can see river otters down there some days. I can remember when there were no bald eagles around here whatsoever, and now they're kind of like crows: they're everywhere. The gold eagles are now the ones becoming rare. There's so much more that can be done. It ties in with greenbelts, bicycle paths, running paths, and changes in the law. Portland, Oregon, changed the law so that people can keep chickens in their backyard. You should talk to David [Robertson] about the birds in Central Park.

My oldest son, Kai, lives just across the street from Westmoreland Park in Portland, Oregon. He's been watching it for several years now. It's one of these parks that was big and level, grassy and nicely planted with big trees and not much else. It did have a nice little bocce ball court up in one corner. It had a creek that ran through it. Someone in the parks department got the brilliant idea to tear it up and make it into a wetland again. They made it go this way and that way and spread out. They raised it up with some rocks here and there. But they kept the bocce ball court. It's still there.

It's a really wonderful transformation of what once was an ecologically thoughtless model of level grass and a few big trees. Kids love the new park. They come in and play in it, move around and climb on boulders. Who

cares if mother says it's a little bit dangerous? [Snyder laughs] There's going to be some danger in life. You might as well start knowing that young. So, cities can be more wild.

Feder: Well, danger is one lesson in impermanence. There are several poems that feel like companions in impermanence in the last two books. In *Danger on Peaks* there's "To All the Girls Whose Ears I Pierced Back Then" and "She Knew All About Art," and of course "Go Now" and the title poem in *This Present Moment*. Is this final lesson in impermanence why you address the reader in "Go Now"? I don't remember you addressing the reader directly in any of your other poems.

Snyder: I never did ever! There's a first time for everything. Of course, the answer to that question is heavy.

Feder: Let me ask another heavy one, then. What would you say is the relationship between your philosophy or spiritual practice and your poetry?

Snyder: I have no idea. I have an idea of what philosophy is, and it is a rational exercise with one hand tied behind your back, so to speak. The difference between a spiritual path and philosophy is that if a person is on a spiritual path you can say to them, "If you want to follow through and learn more about these things you have to meditate." Maybe you should have a special diet.

You can't tell philosophers any special thing they should do, like "You should take drugs." [Feder laughs] Philosophy is a special exercise with special rules. Within those rules, it's quite interesting. It's also interesting to see how people have juggled their way through the rules without finding ways to make them work over the years. They find themselves in the same position. Of course, they cannot explore too far or too freely because then they would lose their position at the university.

Feder: And poetry requires you to explore both far and freely.

Snyder: Yeah, well, you can do anything you like, except people are going to tell you if they don't like it.

Feder: What does that matter?

Snyder: Well, it might matter. Your publisher might fire you. The poet

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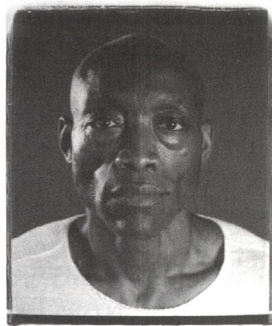
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IN THIS ISSUE

CHUCK CLOSE PHOTOGRAPHS

WOMEN'S WORK

Feminist Art from the Smith College Museum of Art Collection

A Play by AYLA D'HANIM • Letters from GABRIELA MISTRAL

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needs an audience. The artist needs an audience. Any artist (a musician, a painter, a sculptor, any kind of a writer) is in relationship to an audience. That's part of being an artist. Until you have an audience, you're a beginner, or you're an amateur, or you're a dilettante, or you're amusing yourself. And all of that is okay, but you're not an artist.

Feder: Your work emphasizes craft, the importance of being observant and getting observations right, knowing your tools and why you use them.

Snyder: That's just basic stuff. Suppose I was a carpenter. I could say the same things.

Feder: Well, if we extrapolate from this to think about Western culture as a whole, one of the reasons that we're in the mess we're in is that we use tools without understanding them fully or understanding the consequences of using them.

Snyder: That's certainly true. Our tools have outrun us. Our understanding, and even our ability to be good to them. Have you ever wondered what happens to all of those shot-up military vehicles and tanks out in the Iraqi desert? And the great big heavy pieces of equipment that are worth millions of dollars? Some of them may be eventually cleaned up and carefully loaded and shipped back to the United States. They'll probably be shipped back to China and melted down again.

Feder: What do you make of the many proposed technological fixes to our ecological problems, climate engineering for example?

Snyder: Well, I'm not convinced. For one thing, nobody seems to take into account the cost of energy. And from where do we get the energy to make such large scale changes without increasing our problems? The original kind of energy for large public works was slavery. That's how you built the pyramids. Oil is just the modern version of slavery. Why do we still have slaves then?

Feder: Globally, there are millions of slaves. Some reports estimate thirty-five million.

Snyder: Yeah. It's quite a large number. Mostly household workers and sex slaves. But you know the

mindboggling thing about all this is in the fourth century BC, the Chinese emperor took a whole province of people (roughly twenty million of them) and said, "Well, you all are going to pull up and go up north and build the Great Wall." And none of them ever came back apparently. That's the story. It's an old Chinese story. How did they do that? I've been on the Great Wall. It boggles the mind, it really does. It goes on as far as you can see on the highest ridges. How in the hell did they do that? Then you also might ask, "What in the world was it for?" It's much more than you need, to just keep people in or out. They must've been taking some kind of drug.

Feder: I hear you're writing a book on China.

Snyder: On just one period in Chinese history. My particular interest is between the fourth and tenth century. I published seven essays on the subject in *CoEvolution Quarterly* in the 70s.

It was going to be a big project in its own right, and at a certain point I quit working on it because I didn't have the library resources available nearby. I wasn't about to move away from here, so I said to myself I'll let somebody else do this. I thought for a while that Mark Elvin had done the job for me. His book *Retreat of the Elephants* seemed to cover the whole territory. But when I read it I realized a lot of things hadn't been addressed.

There's a wonderful book called *The Bad Earth* by Václav Smil. I think he's a Czech, and he lives and teaches in Canada. Everything in the book comes out of Chinese documents. The Chinese weren't going to let anybody else tell them what was going on in their country. The Chinese control the news inside their country for that very purpose. They don't talk about pollution and climate change. There are young Chinese people that are trying to break through this, and so the Chinese government is trying to get control of the Internet.

Feder: Swinging back, you wrote a wonderful poem about your Mac in *This Present Moment*, the materiality of the digital...

Snyder: That was my first Mac, from 1973 or 1974. You hear that bird? [Cawing in the distance] That's not a

crow; that's a raven. It sounds like a crow, but a crow has a different voice.

Feder: How is it different?

Snyder: It's lighter. Also, the raven can change its voice. It's got more and more different calls than crows. Ravens have over one hundred calls. Crows have about five.

Feder: Speaking of birds, I like the lyric that you tagged to a recent email, the one about the goose and the commons.

Snyder: Oh, that old English poem? That's where you start out with the term "the commons." The guy who is considered the foremost proponent of free-market environmentalism in the United States, Terry Anderson, was on the panel with me in Las Vegas. He said, "The United States is unique in the amount of public land it has." And I said, "What do you mean by that, Terry?" He said, "Well, nobody had had that kind of thing before." I said, "Have you ever heard of the commons?" Did you know that most every country in Europe had large areas that they considered commons, up until modern times? And that they had their own way of managing it? It's just a matter of language.

Feder: As we are sitting here outside, listening to the wild, I want to ask you about intuition. I asked you how you composed poetry many years ago, and you said, "Sometimes inspiration is like an angel whispering in your ear."

Snyder: Well, it's hard to talk about this because we don't have an agreed vocabulary for it. Intuit doesn't have an opposite (extuit?). But there are things that we call intuition. Insights described that way actually cover all kinds of things. They're not all one category.

Feder: Do you still compose and revise in ways that you have in the past?

Snyder: You never know. Sometimes you're right and you don't have to change it. Sometimes you go for years and keep changing it a little at a time.

Feder: Have poems ever come out entirely whole to you?

Snyder: Yeah, every once in a while.

Feder: Rhythm seems very important in your poetry, the music of your words and your lines.

Snyder: That's true. That's very true, but it's interesting how difficult it is to convey that to some people. If I'd try to say to somebody, "You haven't got the lines right. The music is not right."

Feder: They may not understand what you mean by that.

Snyder: It's very hard to explain to somebody what I mean because they resist it.

Everybody thinks that their own music is okay, a lot of people do anyway. If it's really obvious I can show what I mean by saying, "It's not right."

Feder: But intuition plays a role in that, in knowing when the music is right.

Snyder: Well, I don't know. It's partly craft, like language. You hear almost instantly if a pronunciation or a piece of grammar is slightly off. It is difficult to say more than that. But, in some real and complicated sense, it may not even be true. This is what I enjoy as I spend more time talking and hanging out with people, particularly people who speak English as a second or a third language (and understanding my own errors in Japanese and Chinese and French).

Feder: In an interview in *The Paris Review* several years ago, you said wild systems are highly complex, self-organizing, and cannot be intellectually mastered. You then said all natural human languages are wild systems, taking pains to say "natural human languages" and not just "human languages."

Snyder: That's very clear. There are languages which are not natural languages. The one that comes to mind first is Esperanto. But that is modeled mostly on Latin. But people, in the world of semiotics and various kinds of linguistics, use the word "language" almost metaphorically. They mean a semiotic system, a system of signals. Morse code, for example, is an interesting system of symbols. You can learn Morse code. Of course, it applies entirely in terms of the alphabet. There are a number of visual, graphic, nongraphic but visual (like sign language), that work. One step removed from a natural language, a natural language being whatever you grow up with when you're a baby. Everybody grew up

speaking a language. All of them were natural languages. All of them might be considered by some people to be imperfect or slightly imperfect. But mathematics is the only perfection that there is in all of this.

There's been experimentation with the idea of a perfected language, a rationalized language, etc. It's very difficult to do that. One of the reasons it's difficult is that some people assume, wrongly, that the purpose of language is to be accurate. Whereas the truth is there's a whole lot of language used for the purpose of being complex, like saying multiple things at one time, or saying one thing and meaning another.

Feder: Speaking of complexity and ambiguity, can I ask you about cave art? In "Entering the Fiftieth Millennium" (*Back on the Fire*), you discuss the human universality of art in the context of Paleolithic art at Lascaux and Chauvet. Do you have anything to add to what you've written?

Snyder: Well, it's one of those things I keep thinking about. It looks different sometimes one way, and it looks different another way. It doesn't repeat itself that much. What keeps you going are the puzzles, like why are there no human beings? Or whatever human beings are there, and there are some, are stick figures. Obviously they know how to represent a full-bodied animal in color. But human beings come off as very shadowy sort of stick figures, if they're there at all. That's one puzzle. Another puzzle is there are some animals, but not others. Those are the kinds of things I think about. I'm trying to figure out what all of that means, that it's not a representation of the world as such. It's a selective representation.

Feder: What, if any, is the biological role of art? Is it tied to empathy?

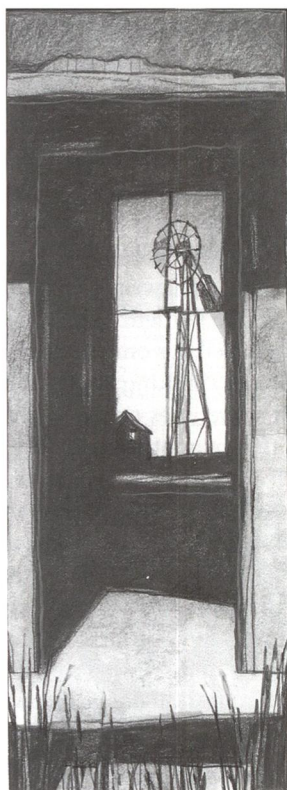
Snyder: Empathy meaning having some feeling for something else?

Feder: Yes, and even the recognition that other creatures have feelings.

Snyder: Probably, you know, like when a little kid has empathy towards a cat. It's not that the kid is intellectually aware that the cat . . . that he's saying to himself that the cat has feelings. In fact, he might say that to a toy truck too, and sometimes kids do. In the simplest and most broad form empathy means

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extending some sense of identity to something, whether it's sentient or not, having respect for its being in some way.

Feder: Does this have a role in art?

Snyder: Sometimes teachers teach by not telling you everything.

Feder: [Feder laughs] This is true.

Snyder: And I am teaching in this case by not speculating. Not that I couldn't say something, but it would be relatively worthless. And then it would be your responsibility to say, "Well, here's Gary Snyder's worthless answer." [Snyder laughs]

Feder: Oh, if I thought something was worthless I would say, "Let's leave it out of the published transcript."

Snyder: That's nice of you, but you should just say it's a worthless answer. [Snyder laughs] Then that would keep me on my toes.

Feder: Well, etiquette, your preferred term instead of morality, is a complicated thing.

Snyder: I like it for that reason.

Feder: Well, there are all kinds of things I want to press you on, but it's a fine line between pressing and being impolite. Are other creatures polite?

Snyder: About six weeks ago a bear got into my kitchen and knocked a lovely pottery jar to the floor.

Feder: A bear got into your kitchen?

Snyder: Yeah. They do that from time to time, American black bears. We have to say black bear, but some of them are brown. Some of them are cinnamon colored. They are not a pure black black bear.

Feder: How did you scare him away?

Snyder: He was gone by the time I got in there. I heard something break, so I grabbed a flashlight and went into the kitchen. As soon as the light started coming in he went out the window that he came in. He tried coming back a couple of nights later, but I had the place all locked up by that time.

Feder: And there are mountain lions out here too?

Snyder: They're around here. Yeah we have them. In fact, somebody said they saw a big one in the last month and a half. They've seen a really big one on the road here. There are many, many deer here. There's more than enough deer for them to eat. So we're not worried about it.

Feder: May I ask a question related to *Danger on Peaks*?

Snyder: Well, it doesn't matter to me. They're all equal in time.

Feder: Rereading your haibun, I wondered why you don't write syllabic haiku in English.

Snyder: Because English has a different relationship in the number of syllables per morpheme than Japanese does. There are other reasons it doesn't transfer too. Japanese prosody is based on syllable count. It has no accented syllables, so there's no such a thing as a foot in Japanese poetry. English has accented and unaccented syllables. The music of English prosody is, quite simply, the play between the feet that you get out of accented and unaccented syllables. Many languages do not have accents. These are the kinds of assumptions that I try to teach away when I teach poetry.

Elliot Weinberger and I were in Hong Kong with a woman from Albania, a poet, and he asked her a question about the Albanian language, which is very close to Greek. He said to her, "Well, how do you write Albanian?" She said, "Well, we use the Roman alphabet." And then Elliot turned to me and he said, "Gary, did you know the Albanians don't even have their own alphabet?" And I said, "Neither do we, Elliot." He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, we're using the Roman alphabet." "Oh!"

It's a borrowed alphabet. All the alphabets in the world are derived from the original model, which is Phoenician. The very beginning of the alphabet goes from Phoenician, to Aramaic, and then it becomes very much like old Hebrew scattered around in the Middle East. Then it migrated to India, and in India it got all these varieties of script, including Tibetan and Mongolian. And then another branch went up to Greece where it became Greek and also the language spoken just north of Rome. Damn. I can't remember the name of that culture. It was a very wonderful culture. It practiced human sacrifice, though. They lose a few points for that.

Anyway, the only alphabet . . . but I'm not a hundred percent sure about this . . . ever developed that is not from this line is the Korean alphabet,

which is called Hangul. They totally invented it themselves, and it works beautifully.

If it is not an alphabet though, it's a syllabary. A syllabary is where you have a consonant, vowel, consonant, vowel, consonant, and vowel. . . like Japanese does when it isn't using Chinese characters . . . like "ah," "ee," "oo," "eh," "oh." That's the five Japanese vowels. Then they go into the syllable lines, the "k" line: "kah," "khee," "koo," "keh," "koh," "sah," "shee," "suh," "seh," "soh," "nah," "nee," "nuh," "neh," "noh." And each of those is a complete symbol. It's only written symbol meaning "noh," or "neh," or "nee". So it's a consonant-vowel combination.

Feder: I have another question loosely related to *Danger on Peaks*. Rereading "Spirit Lake in the Mountain," I thought of Thoreau. Does he still influence you?

Snyder: I've been to Walden Pond about four times now. I love going there, walking around the pond and Concord, looking at all the different places and buildings, many of which are still the same. I went to Walden partly to understand it, and partly to understand how it touched Thoreau. It's a very strange lake actually. It's a kettle, formed by glaciers. Toward the end of the life of a glacier, in its last several millennia, you get a lake that is deep and round, and not formed by a big scrape. It's quite an interesting place, but Thoreau was very smart to leave after two years.

I understand Thoreau better now than I did when I first read him in the sense [that I now know] I'm not him and he's not me. There are things he did that I really admire but would never do.

Feder: Such as?

Snyder: Go off walking in a straight line through the swamp, in a different direction every day. I don't like walking in straight lines. I don't have that kind of surveyor mind, surveyor mentality. That's how they found Ishi, incidentally. They never would've found Ishi's camp if there wasn't this guy running a survey line. So he just went right up the hillside, through the brush and everything, and he came on this beautifully hidden little camp that was Ishi's last living place.

Feder: You talked quite a bit about Ishi many years ago in your course on

the San Francisco Renaissance. That was a wonderful course.

Snyder: Yeah. Carol [Koda] came to that. I'm so glad I did that seminar.

Feder: Oh, me too. It was wonderful to hear you talk about Rexroth, Spicer, Whalen, Blaser, Ginsberg, McClure and others. Who are you reading now?

Snyder: Brenda Hillman, Jane Hirshfield, and Joanne Kyger. I get more interested in Joanne as time goes on. Her simplicities are subtle.

Going back for a minute, what I was going to say about Thoreau is that I never read him till I was on lookout, the second year I was on Sourdough Mountain. I read Walden and I said, "Oh! I should've read this earlier. It's very good."

Feder: What other books did you take up there?

Snyder: Well, I was on lookout for two seasons. The first season I took a Middle English Chaucer, a complete Chaucer, with a really good glossary in the back of the Middle English words, so that by the time the summer was over I could read it without looking at the glossary anymore. I read *Moby-Dick* while I was working on the trail crew in the mountains for the forest service.

Feder: Was this around the same time you read Milton? I've got "Milton by Firelight" in my head.

Snyder: That was another trail job that I had where I picked up a Milton at the Goodwill on my way to the mountains.

Feder: "Burning the Small Dead" is another of my favorite poems. I mentioned this to David [Robertson] and he said, "Yes! That's one of the quintessential Gary Snyder poems. And the other one is 'Waiting for a Ride.'" So, what constitutes the quintessential Snyder poem?

Snyder: Once you've written your poems you can be separate from them, you know? They're on their own. They have to fight for their own survival. So what is it you really want to ask me?

Feder: How are your newest poems different from those you wrote forty or twenty years ago? Are you in any way a different poet now, at eighty-five? If that's not too intrusive a question.

Snyder: Well, one difference is I feel like my work is done so I can do

anything I like. I don't really have to write any more poetry, but if I do that doesn't hurt. And so I do sometimes still, occasionally. But I don't really want to add to what I've written. People have too much trouble with it already.

Feder: Do you ever have the urge to rewrite any of your earlier poems? So many poets have done that.

Snyder: I don't have an urge to. No. But sometimes when I read a poem aloud I change it a little bit. But I don't then rewrite. I just let it go.

Feder: I once asked you, perhaps by email recently, about "What You Should Know to be a Poet." If memory serves you said that you didn't (or didn't want to) include it in a reprint.

Snyder: That's a poem I need to rewrite. It's a little too gross.

Feder: Well, students respond to that poem immediately.

Snyder: Really?

Feder: Yes! When I, in my most serious academic voice, read that turn, "kiss the ass of the devil and eat shit; / fuck his horny barbed cock," they feel the jar of it and they're more present in their bodies.

Snyder: Well, that's good.

Feder: And the last line: "real danger. gambles. and the edge of death." The movement is perfect. It is what you should know to know you're alive.

Snyder: "Real danger." Yeah. Well I better leave that in. So my biographer, John Suiter, speaking of revision, is still working on that biography. I don't think he's ever going to finish it. He spends so much time on things that I had forgotten about even. Anyway, one of the more recent things he sent me is an account of the climb we did on Mount Rainier in 1950 or maybe in '49. Anyway I, and several of my climbing partners, young men more or less my age and some older Mazama men, climbed Mount Rainier. We had some bad luck which darn near killed us, but nobody got hurt. We came within a hair of being swept away by a big avalanche. John writes about that beautifully. In fact, he contacted people who were on that line.

Feder: That's what a good biographer should do. I can't wait to read it.

Snyder: No one wants to read a biography five volumes long. There's too many other things that people need to do. □